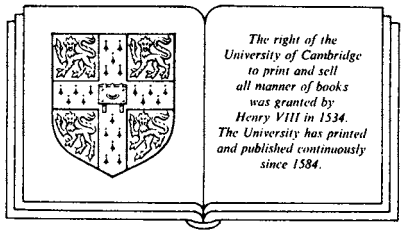
The politics of community

Migration and politics in antebellum Ohio

KENNETH J. WINKLE
University of Nebraska, Lincoln



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Introduction

This study examines the impact of migration on political participation in antebellum Ohio. The idea that migration, in one form or another, helped to shape American political behavior and institutions is as old as the westward movement itself. In a guide for migrants published in Cincinnati in 1848, for example, John Mason Peck observed that "Migration has become almost a habit, in the West. Hundreds of men can be found, not fifty years of age, who have settled for the fourth, fifth, or sixth time on a new spot." Peck went on to portray wave after wave of frontiersmen passing westward, taming a wilderness, and learning a new way of life from their experiences. This and similar contemporary descriptions of the impact of westward migration on both individuals and their society later emboldened a generation of historians, Frederick Jackson Turner and his students most prominent among them, to focus on the westward movement as an important, even crucial agent in shaping the character of American political life. Today, few historians would argue along with Turner that "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development." But the impact of westward migration on American politics, and particularly the Turnerian portrait of "individualism, economic equality, freedom to rise, democracy" in the new West, remains a persistent theme within American historiography.[1]

The impact of migration on American political development during the nineteenth century has been a perennial subject of controversy, but that continuing debate has recently acquired new urgency. Approaching the subject of migration from an entirely different direction, a school of "new" social historians, employing quantitative methods, has pointed to internal migration as a central feature not only of the new West but of nineteenth-century society throughout America. A host of quantitative "community studies" makes abundantly clear that migration – whether from east to west, from country to city, or from Europe to America – played a dominant role in shaping nineteenth-century social, economic, and cultural life. Social historians' discovery that the frontier was not unique for its

restless migration has not halted the venerable search for some link between migration and national development but has actually reinvigorated it. It is now clear that frequent migration was a "habit" among many more Americans and a problem within many more communities than Turner and his disciples ever imagined.[2]

At the same time, the new social historians have amassed an array of ever more sophisticated historical tools for measuring migration and examining its impact on nineteenth-century behavior and institutions. Migration studies are now crucial to our interpretation of nineteenth-century social organization and development. Political historians, however, have been slower to incorporate the conclusions and the methods of migration research into their own studies of nineteenth-century political behavior, to assess the impact of such pervasive migration on nineteenth-century politics. Quantitative community studies that focus on migration represent a largely untapped body of substantive and methodological insights into nineteenth-century social and economic behavior that political historians overlook at their own peril. The new body of migration studies, in short, poses a substantive and methodological challenge that political historians can no longer ignore.[3]

Indeed, modern migration studies arose in the first place from historians' initial attempts to give Turner's frontier thesis a rigorous empirical meaning, to ground the frontier experience in a broader historical context. As early as 1935, for example, James C. Malin, a leading critic of Turner, examined persistence and migration in five Kansas rainfall belts, noting distinct "cycles" of migration that corresponded with general cycles of economic boom and bust. Malin drew on aggregate records of residence to establish a link between migration and economic development even after the frontier had passed. The idea of such a general relationship between rates of migration and levels of economic activity held up remarkably well as the number of community studies that focus on migration swelled during the succeeding half-century.[4]

Although historians continued to overlook the full extent of geographical mobility for many years, the restless mobility of nineteenth-century Americans became stunningly apparent with the application of the geographical case study to historical research. Beginning in the late 1950s, agricultural historians working in the Midwest produced a flurry of rural population studies that made not only theoretical but crucial methodological contributions to the study of American migration. William L. Bowers, Mildred Throne, Merle Curti, Peter Coleman, and others produced important case

studies of geographical mobility among actual individuals in nineteenth-century Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois. Those case studies, Curti's most prominent among them, found much of their inspiration in the continuing controversy over the validity of the Turner thesis. Succeeding migration or "persistence" studies have tended to focus on uncovering both the extent and the sources of geographical mobility, rather than its political consequences. Virtually all of these studies of individual-level migration have identified wealth, occupation, and age as the most important sources of geographical mobility. During the nineteenth century, persistence was apparently a privilege that belonged only to the wealthiest and most highly skilled Americans. Westward migration continued unabated well beyond the frontier stage, and the cityward migration and foreign immigration that joined it reflected, in general, a constant search for economic opportunity.[5]

The greatest impact of the rural population studies was not, however, to settle the debate over the Turner thesis at all but to lend many aspects of that controversy sudden national importance. In 1964, when Stephan Thernstrom produced the first study of geographical mobility within an eastern city, it became quite apparent that restless migration was a national phenomenon throughout the nineteenth century. Thernstrom set the pattern for a spate of urban community studies by applying the case-study approach to urban populations. Still, most of the early urban case studies focused on social rather than geographical mobility. Only more recently have historians come to consider both varieties of migration – geographical and social – as national phenomena that were intimately related. It is now clear that "moving out" and "moving up" were largely expressions of a common impulse – the search for economic opportunity – and may in fact have been interdependent. From this national perspective, the frontier was only one expression of that ceaseless search for economic opportunity that was a central feature of life throughout nineteenth-century America. Westward migration was indeed only one of many means to that end, only the most conspicuous of many varieties of migration.[6]

By beginning with the conclusions and methodology of quantitative community studies, political historians can examine the political consequences of widespread and frequent migration during the nineteenth century. Even a cursory review of migration studies shows that restless migration was a phenomenon not only of the frontier but of long-settled communities throughout America and throughout the nineteenth century. Migration studies routinely un-

cover rates of persistence from just under 25 percent to just over 50 percent between decennial censuses. Further, it has become clear that decennial rates of migration tell only part of the story, because they conceal the movement of migrants between census years. In fact, annual rates of migration were typically two to three times higher than we would have expected, judging from decennial rates alone. Every year, a significant minority of Americans became migrants, and a majority may have moved during each decade. We can now ask the same questions about American political behavior in general that we have long applied to the frontier, questions about the relationship between wholesale migration and patterns of participation, partisan organization, the distribution of political power, political stability, the development of local political institutions, and the rise of a more egalitarian political system.[7]

The mid-nineteenth century is a good starting place to look for the impact of migration on political participation. By almost any standard, the mid-nineteenth century saw the emergence of modern participant politics in America. After 1840, state legislatures and constitutional conventions gradually revoked property and taxpaying qualifications, and by 1860 most states had embraced the principle of universal white manhood suffrage. At the same time, nationally competitive parties began devising new campaign strategies designed to create strong grassroots organizations, generate deep partisan commitments, and mobilize voters. Later, especially during the 1850s, party leaders eagerly embraced emotional sectional and cultural issues, such as slavery and immigration, to attract even more voters to the polls. In this environment of flexible suffrage rules and heated partisan competitiveness, eligible voters trooped to the polls in record numbers.[8]

Further, historians have come to characterize the mid-nineteenth century as an era of "boundlessness," an age of cultural as well as physical expansion. A popular feeling of "boundlessness," which John Higham associated with the rise of Jacksonian democracy, appeared after 1815 in response to a new sense of national security that was accompanied by rapid technological advance, political democratization, a revival of evangelical Protestantism, and a novel romantic philosophy. Such boundlessness was centrifugal, breeding territorial and economic expansion, along with a diffuse popular restlessness, a multitude of perfectionist reform movements, and a sudden wave of westward migration. Colonial culture had emphasized a communal organization of society that prevented or at least tempered individualism for the sake of family, congregation, and

community. Historians have recently noted the organization of colonial society into "closed corporate communities," but they have also outlined a general retreat from communalism and a corresponding rise of individualism as the eighteenth century came to a close.[9]

Antebellum philosophers idealized the new America as "an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling." The antebellum legal environment simultaneously sought to foster economic growth and cultural expansiveness by releasing individual initiative from the shackles of communal responsibilities. Nineteenth-century jurisprudence reflected a new confidence and national aggressiveness that took the community for granted and stressed economic opportunity for individuals. The same decades that brought the most aggressive westward expansion and the highest levels of political participation in American history also witnessed Americans' weakest legal and cultural commitment to their communities. Such a cultural, social, and economic boundlessness gave widespread migration free rein in shaping the outlines of an emerging system of participant politics. In fact, some historians have linked the Civil War itself to that cultural expansiveness, as an "excess of democracy" weakened institutional restraints and bred political instability.[10]

Traditionally, students of electoral participation have emphasized the most dramatic changes in the American voting universe, focusing on the impact of high levels of popular participation on parties and policies during these decades of expansion, most particularly during the Civil War era. They have made important advances in analyzing election returns to sort out a wide variety of political, social, and economic influences on political behavior. But our understanding of the demographic foundations of this awakening of political involvement and of the sources of popular participation at the local level remains meager. In particular, historians are beginning to exploit individual-level electoral data to show more precisely how an array of social and demographic variables acted within political systems to encourage or discourage political participation. By focusing on individual participants in the political process, these individual-level studies reveal vividly the fluid mobility of the antebellum electorate.[11]

The American political system has quite obviously come to grips with the demands of a modern, mobile electorate. Today, fairly uniform and equitable residence requirements, generally convenient registration procedures, absentee ballots, and even standard forms of personal identification such as the driver's license accommodate a mobile society and bar relatively few migrants from the

polls. All these adaptations to a migratory electorate were unknown, however, during the antebellum decades. They developed only gradually during the nineteenth century as the political system came to grips with frequent migration. Residence requirements were a much more controversial political issue before the Civil War, and migration put voters at a considerably greater political disadvantage. During this formative period of popular politics, we might therefore expect high levels of migration to find their first political expression and to leave a deep impression on emerging political institutions and behaviors.[12]

This study is a comprehensive examination of the relationship between politics and internal migration, migration within the United States, during these formative years. Historians have long noted the influence of heavy European immigration on the content and conduct of nineteenth-century political life. Indeed, a growing body of ethnocultural studies has convincingly demonstrated an important relationship between voters' ethnic and religious backgrounds and their partisan affiliations. This study does not discount such ethnocultural aspects of antebellum political life but focuses on the personal experiences of migrants and persisters rather than on their inherited, ethnocultural characteristics. This study argues, in short, that migration as a social process made an important impression on migrants' political behavior quite apart from their national, regional, or religious heritages. It seeks to sort out the impact of migrants' common experiences, as migrants, on their political behavior. Such a behavioral approach means simply that this study emphasizes the actual experiences of migrants and persisters and the impact of those personal experiences on their political behavior and attitudes. Evidence suggests that Ohioans reacted more strongly to the sheer numbers of internal migrants who passed through their state and their communities than to those migrants' ethnic origins. Only 11 percent of Ohioans were foreign-born in 1850, whereas almost 40 percent were interstate migrants. Indeed, Ohio did not alter suffrage rules for the foreign-born between 1809 and the Civil War but experimented continually during the same period with suffrage requirements for internal migrants. In practice, native-born migrants and foreign immigrants appear to have undergone very similar experiences, as migrants, on their way to the polling place, despite any differences in the way they behaved once they arrived there. The experience of migration exerted its greatest influence not on partisanship but on patterns of participation. The impact of migration on patterns of political participation and the voters' actual expe-

riences as migrants, rather than their ascribed attributes, therefore take precedence in this study.[13]

The present study of migration and politics therefore emphasizes the political and social behavior of individuals rather than focusing on the behavior of aggregated ethnic, religious, or occupational groups. Almost by definition, migration studies examine the behavior of individuals. Any examination of the impact of migration on political behavior, therefore, must also begin with individuals. Such a focus diverts attention away from national political events as a point of departure and highlights political processes at the local level, encouraging a "bottom up" approach to political history. Concentration on the impact of migration on politics can thus provide insights into the inner workings of community politics, including local patterns of power, the theory and application of suffrage rules, local party organization, and actual election practices.

This study draws heavily on individual-level sources, many of which have never before been examined. It employs quantitative records of political and social behavior among individuals, where necessary, as well as written expressions of attitudes, opinions, and especially personal experiences. When possible, the study permits individual migrants and persisters, voters and policymakers to speak for themselves. For these reasons alone, this is a case study, surveying the impact of migration on local politics within a single state. Indeed, many of the chapters focus on single counties, and some of them highlight individual townships because of the precise, individual-level analysis that is often required to unravel subtle relationships between migration and politics. Figure I.1 shows the five local study areas on which much of this study focuses. The local study areas include communities located within five of Ohio's six geographical regions to ensure broad coverage of statewide trends.

The first two chapters survey patterns of migration in antebellum Ohio. Chapter 1 draws on census data and the observations of contemporary commentators to explore the impact of the westward movement on patterns of settlement. The chapter reveals a far-reaching transition from rapid settlement during the 1830s and 1840s to more sedate growth in population and, in eastern Ohio, actual population decline during the 1850s. Ohioans' cheerful approval of migration disappeared as the line of most rapid settlement moved ever westward through and beyond the state. Urban growth, new transportation routes, and foreign immigration took on new prominence as the westward movement into Ohio came to a close.

Figure I.1. The five local study areas and Ohio's regions.

Chapter 2 is a county-level case study of migration that focuses on voters and sorts out long-distance migration from merely local moves. The chapter surveys the interaction of transportation, economic activity, urban growth, and migration within a local electorate. Records of residence among individuals reveal that population growth and decline within a single county rested on the net balance between immigrants and emigrants over long distances and not on local-level migration. Even local patterns of settlement depended

most heavily on rates of migration over long distances. This evidence suggests that migration was a near-universal experience in antebellum Ohio and that most voters, at one time or another, were long-distance migrants.

The next four chapters examine the impact of these patterns of migration among voters on various aspects of political participation – suffrage, electoral practices, voting, and local political leadership. Chapter 3 examines the impact of migration on suffrage. An examination of case law and statutes demonstrates that increasing levels of migration after 1815 provoked a new judicial conception of legal residence in Ohio that made it easier, in theory, for migrants to gain suffrage in their new communities. Reacting to their experiences with migration, Ohioans gradually altered their state's suffrage rules during the nineteenth century to accommodate increasing numbers of internal migrants. Reflecting national legal trends, Ohio jurists gradually broadened rules of suffrage for internal migrants, giving migrants more freedom to move without suffering legal disabilities and to participate in their communities even as relative newcomers. At the beginning of the century, voters had to depend on their communities to grant them rights of suffrage, but by the end of the Civil War voters were free to participate in communities of their own choosing. These new rules of suffrage awarded migrants important new political rights.

Resisting this theoretical liberalization of suffrage rules, however, the state's legislators continued to restrict suffrage for migrants in practice. In the wake of migration, the legislature had to draw explicit rules of legal residence to sort out legal from illegal voters. A new election law, passed in 1841, defined legal residence in Ohio for the first time but then permitted a local board of election judges to apply those rules on election day. As a result, a minority of persisters could use residence rules to control access to the ballot box and screen newcomers. The mobility of the majority of voters therefore lent exaggerated political power to a small minority of settled persisters. These electoral practices that discriminated against recent migrants are the subject of Chapter 4.

Chapter 5 discusses the impact of new suffrage rules, new electoral practices, and patterns of migration on voting. Aggregate electoral data can conceal complex patterns of participation that reflect the restless geographical mobility of voters during the period. The combination of increasing migration and a broadening suffrage produced sometimes dizzying rates of turnover among voters at the local level. Most voters cast only one or two ballots in a community